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A STUDY OF THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF SON HOUSE ON THE IDENTITY
AND CHARACTER OF BLUES CULTURE

by
Kyle Anthony Crockett

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial
fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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To Dr. Charles Wilson, who has provided a matchless example of academic integrity,
but most importantly, how to truly adore the world that surrounds us.

To all of my friends, who remind me daily that unflinching individuality is one of the
greatest gifts of all.

To my family, who has never once abandoned my side, and only a few times
questioned the methods of my scattered brain.

To those who love music, and all the pure beauty that accompanies it.

ABSTRACT
KYLE ANTHONY CROCKETT: A Study of the Life and Legacy of Son House
(Under the direction of Dr. Charles Wilson)

This thesis explores the unique and pivotal life of Son House, a Mississippi bluesman from Lyon, Mississippi, who did much to change the identity and perpetuate the existence of blues music and culture. Furthermore, House was influential in shaping blues music as a medium for historical research, as they revealed a strikingly honest perception of the tumultuous and evil circumstances for African Americans in the South during the early twentieth century.

Research on Son House was a unique experience, in that it called not only for academic exploration, but also human exploration. When researching the importance of blues music in the South, especially in Mississippi, one must dive into the genre to better understand the intricate characters and atmosphere that shaped them. This meant visiting the Delta, talking to peers and colleagues who share enthusiasm for the blues, and broadening the scope of academic research to include the very human aspects of blues culture which are vital to understanding its history.

In this thesis, documentation of Son House's life and decisions lead to a deeper understanding of the nature of blues music. The blues are widely known as "sad" music, but this is one-dimensional. Through House, and the blues phenomenon that succeeded his career, one can begin to see that blues music is as layered and complex as the human who sings them, and as shocking as the turmoil that shaped them.

In this study, Son House—who lived a life characterized by extreme vice or extreme Christianity, and often at the same time—serves as the catalyst for the instillation of that dichotomy into blues culture. As one of the first "large-scale" blues musicians, he was also one of the first to incorporate heavy reliance on spirituality and the human experience; and while House often played for fiscal security, his predecessors saw no reason to enhance the weight of their blues if the dollar they received for them were there regardless.

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I. ROCKY, RELIGIOUS BEGINNINGS

Time has allowed for more and more focus upon Mississippi blues and its history, which has led to the resurfacing and subsequent documentation of various bluesmen, whose lives beyond recorded music might have otherwise gone unnoticed by the outside world. For Mississippians, though, their stories resonate with very real significance and relevance in regard to the Mississippi identity historically, culturally, and ideologically. Their stories bear a prism-like effect concerning the racial history of the state, situated in time and place in such a way as to create a watershed of cultural reflection and observation, and a significant influence on future generations as well as the outside world's perceptions and awareness of Mississippi culture, for better and worse. The beautifully intricate marriage of evil oppression and prejudice, beaten backs, and the throes of vice and sins of the flesh, with deep religion, community support, and veiled optimism did much to produce the blues genre at its heart as well as to reflect a similarly beautiful intricacy in regard to Mississippi and her people's own identity. Son House, an early Mississippi bluesman whose life was a constant struggle between blues and vice and preaching and devout spirituality, was at the forefront of those who represented this diversity of character, a character as strong and as muddy as the Mississippi River itself.

Historian Daniel Beaumont's 2011 biography, *Preachin' The Blues: The Life and Times of Son House*, has become the authoritative source for factual documentation of the bluesman's fascinating and muddled history, an individual history whose foggy and enigmatic nature inherently mirrored an entire population of Mississippians. Many of the details concerning House's life are disputed and unconfirmed, and historians can only use the most likely documentation accompanied by citations and references to other possibilities surrounding factual history. For instance, countless students of blues history have placed House's birth anywhere from

1900 to 1902, a fairly large window of time that provides for comfortable placement of all the existing stories of the man's birth account. Even in this single instance of House's origin and early life, the man's life and identity reflect the mythic nature of the blues: disorganized, argued over, full of misconception and overlooked narrative gems, yet eternally present and undeniably human.

Eddie James "Son" House, Jr. was born to Eddie House and Maggie House in the small Coahoma County town of Lyon, Mississippi. Lyon is situated upon US Highway 61, just north of Clarksdale itself. Clarksdale, and Coahoma in a broader sense, has a royal place among blues lore and culture as it has produced a number of huge names in blues—including Son's close friend and collaborator Willie Brown—and boasts one of the longest histories with the genre itself. However, Son House himself had little affiliation with blues music during his early life. His childhood and family life were tumultuous. His father had taken a second wife, Mabelle, by 1920 as confirmed by U.S. Census Records, suggesting a divorce early on in House's life. There was a half-brother named Newt, who was four years old at the time. By 1930, Eddie, Sr. had taken a third wife; on the 1930 Census, House, Sr. is listed with a wife named Rowena, who was 28 years old at the time. Son is absent from the 1930 Census, which might point to his time in prison; regardless, Son's newest stepmother was his own age. Son was a middle child, accompanied by older brother Rathel and younger brother Lee Jackson, or simply L.J. Rathel's story is mostly unknown, but it is known that L.J. died at a young age. Another possible brother, Frank, appeared in various places, but was more likely a cousin. Concerning Frank, a close friend of the House's, Willie Moore, concerning Frank years later bluntly recalled, "he was killed."¹

This unpredictable and often unstable family setting existed alongside a deep connection by his father to music and the church, despite House, Sr.'s inclination to alcoholism. Son House remembered a musical upbringing, but not one in the vein of the blues: "I always sung. I was brought up singing church music and most of my family were 'songsters.'"² House, Sr. had numerous brothers who played in a brass

¹ Daniel Beaumont, *Preachin' the Blues: The Life and Times of Son House* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 28.

² Lawrence Cohn, "Son House: Delta Bluesman," *Saturday Review* 51, No. 39 September 28, 1968, 69.

band together, and he himself played tuba. House, Jr. recalled that his father did three things: “Blow his bass horn with his brothers. And he’d play guitar a little bit when he wasn’t with his brothers. And blacksmith. Those three things. And drink corn liquor. That made four. That’s it.”³

Despite his vices, House, Sr. attended Allen Chapel, a church some miles outside of Clarksdale. Around this time House, Jr. recalled a change of heart in his father, when he tossed aside his vices in favor of a life in service to God and the church, an ideological clash not unlike the one that would embody and define Son House’s life and career. It is worth noting that House always remembered his father’s guitar playing as a private occurrence, away from his brothers or the community. This seems to foreshadow the notion of the blues as a direct departure from the teachings of Christianity, or perhaps a channel for the expression of guilt concerning the vice-filled lives these people led.

Beaumont’s account of Son House’s early life details his relationship to his father, and then moves on to the time Son spent with his mother, Maggie, but this creates a bit of room for argument. House recalled moving with his mother to Tallulah, Louisiana, a town across the Mississippi River from Vicksburg, Mississippi. House placed this chapter in the years of 1916 through 1920; however, Beaumont previously noted House’s presence on the 1920 Census record with his father. The influence of God in the Church most heavily influenced Son’s life in this period, living with his mother in Louisiana. As a fifteen year old, Son spent time as a preacher in Algiers, Louisiana, a small impoverished community on the outskirts of New Orleans. This period was also characterized by a detestation of the blues and a lack of intimate familiarity toward them, on the part of House. Still, music and the blues forced their way into his psyche, refusing to forsake House even though he had forsaken them. While preaching, Son made extra money shining shoes on the streets of New Orleans, Louisiana. Ironically enough, one of the teenager’s frequent customers was one Mr. Louis Armstrong. Armstrong, who was born in 1901, could not have been much older than House himself. “I used to shine his shoes every morning,” House recalled, humorously adding that he was “already a big man.”

³Tape recording by Harry Oster, April 24, 1965. now part of the collection of The American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress. Taken from Beaumont’s *Preachin’ the Blues*.

Despite his rejection of blues music, House still placed his perceptions of New Orleans within the blues realm of understanding: “The singers were a little different in New Orleans. They sang mostly ballads and not blues.”⁴

II. DEVELOPMENT OF HOUSE’S INNER STRUGGLE

After his childhood, Son House found himself once again in the heat of the Delta. This would have been 1920 or 1921, making the bluesman about twenty years old. The Census for that year places him under his father’s Lyon roof, but it does contradict Son’s own recollections, which time itself may have weakened. However

⁴ Lawrence Cohn, “Son House: Delta Bluesman,” 69.

he married Carrie Martin, one of only a few women the bluesman would truly love. She was a religious woman from New Orleans, and the couple moved to Martin's father's farm in Centerville, Louisiana. Again, this creates a discrepancy of facts; if he was nineteen living with Martin in Louisiana, how was he listed in Clarksdale with his father? Perhaps the move came right on the heels of Census record collection, allowing him—as far as records are concerned—to be in two places at once. Nonetheless, House seemed content with his marriage despite his family's condemnation of the union (they did not attend the marriage ceremony).⁵

The bliss ended, though, when House began to believe that the marriage was not a union of mutual love, but rather of benefit. Martin's father was old, and a husband for his daughter gave him not only another provider for Carrie, but also an extra pair of working hands. Son quickly acted on these suspicions as he recalled, "I left her hangin' on the gatepost, with her father tellin' me to come back so we could plough some more."⁶ This decision could have come from a variety of intentions. It was characteristic of House to be opposed to and agitated by hard labor conditions, as evidenced by him running away from his own father's field for a short stint in Memphis.⁷ However, it is also fitting to see his abandonment as a reaction to Martin's backhanded ways. It seems that House found great solace in the idea of a personal, intimate relationship, as that was a guiding notion behind his Christianity and his career in blues music. Perhaps to House, Martin's decision to marry him for reasons absent of love or personal connection was an intolerable stain on the mark of his definition of union. Certainly, House defaced the idea of marriage himself in marrying multiple times over, but he might have argued that none of his marriages were absent of an intense connection or attachment to a relationship between himself and another entity. Furthermore, he might have argued that his inability to maintain a monogamous relationship stemmed from the intensity of his compassion proving too overwhelming for just one woman.

After a restless 1920s, House took on many jobs in many places; some include a deckhand for a riverboat, a driver of a Memphis trolley, and most importantly, a

⁵Interview with John Fahey, from Beaumont, *Preachin' the Blues*, 36.

⁶Stephen Calt, liner notes to *The Real Delta Blues: 14 Songs From the Man Who Taught Robert Johnson*, USA: Blue Goose 2016, 1975.

⁷*Ibid.*

ranch hand in north Louisiana raising horses. It was this job, and this job alone, that House thoroughly enjoyed. This is evidenced not only in House's own recollections, but in the identifying cowboy hat he acquired there, an item House would wear for much of his life following his time on the ranch. Returning to the notion of Son House as a seeker of personal connection with others, it is easy to see why his time on the ranch was so much more enjoyable to him than other work. In raising horses, House was able to develop an intimate, constantly evolving relationship with another being, much like his relationship to Christ and the blues. An added dimension to this work could have been the familial role House took as a father figure to the horses, offering to them the care and attention that may well have been absent in his own upbringing.

All the while, House remained a man of God but his intentions were diverse. A hatred of the unjust early twentieth-century Mississippi labor system characterized House's life, as he repeatedly left jobs after tiring of the brutality and discrimination he constantly faced. It was not exactly this labor system that House so loathed, though, but rather the incomprehensibly evil atmosphere that such a system nourished. Beaumont observes, "The black preacher was the only man in the world of young Son House who stood some chance of escaping the brutal conditions of rural labor in the South."⁸ House had already heard his calling to spread the word of God, and he cleverly realized that such a profession put him in a prime position to avoid a laborious lifestyle plagued by toil and oppression as well as to make a better financial living than that of his field-working peers. Son himself voiced this motivation in his 1930 recording of "Preachin' the Blues," when he sang: "Oh, I'm gon' get me religion, I'm gon' join the Baptist church; I'm gon' be a Baptist preacher and I sure won't have to work."⁹ "That was pastoring," Son recalled, "Pastor the people, yeah. *And the people paid—yeah.*"¹⁰

This career also kept house out of the clutches and perceived moral pitfalls of blues culture, at least for a time. Historian Jon Michael Spencer observes, "It was orthodox 'blues belief' that those who chose to sing the blues were gambling away

⁸Beaumont, 36.

⁹Son House, "Preachin' the Blues," Paramount 13013, LP, 1930.

¹⁰Son House, interview by Jeff Titon, "Living Blues Interview: Son House," *Living Blues* no. 31, March-April 1977, 14.

their chance to reap the eternal bounty and would reap what they sowed.”¹¹

Blueswoman Flora Molton, who at one show was startled by her husband from behind, recalled, “I said, ‘Oh you scared me.’ He said, ‘That’s the way death’s going to slip up on you.’ And for a long time I didn’t sing no blues.”¹² House echoed this idea recalling in a 1969 interview, “After I heard that most of all my old boys had died, I got scared and quit playing the blues,”¹³ as if it was the very performance of blues music that was dooming his contemporaries to early graves, and not the gruff and rowdy lifestyle that accompanied blues culture.

However, House went the opposite direction on numerous occasions; of one such instance, the bluesman said in a 1964 concert in Wabash, Indiana, “I can’t hold God in one hand and the Devil in the other. Them two guys don’t get along together too well. I got to turn one of ‘em loose. So I got out of the pulpit.”¹⁴ At first glance, this spells out Son’s denunciation of God and religion, but upon further consideration of his career and work, perhaps he meant quite the opposite. Certainly, he forsook his life as a preacher, offering the message of Christ from pulpit to pulpit, but perhaps he made the decision with a more optimistic and evangelical mind. With Son’s keen perception and position within the church as well as the rowdy and rambling blues lifestyle, he might have deemed the pulpit a place incapable of ministering to those afflicted by the woes of deep sin. For Son, there was no place for the Devil in the midst of God. However, by playing the blues with his personal religious struggle at heart, Son found a way to embody a key notion of Christianity: in the midst of the Devil, there was not only a place for God, but in fact a need for His presence there.

Perhaps, at least to an extent, Son’s blues were a form of hyper-ministry, completely submersing himself in its culture at the sacrifice of his own character (he himself succumbed to alcoholism and many other vices), in the eternally optimistic hope of preaching a Christian-like message of faith in the Lord, through whatever crisis. Son promoted the opportunity of positive change and personal reform within blues culture and to the lost souls who believed themselves completely beyond the

¹¹Jon Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil*, (University of Tennessee: Knoxville, 1993), 55.

¹²Flora Molton in discussion with Eleanor Ellis, *Living Blues* files, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of Mississippi, 7.

¹³Michael Goodwin, “Son House: You Can’t Fool God,” *Rolling Stone*, December 27, 1969.

¹⁴Beaumont, *Preachin’ the Blues*, 42.

possibility of rescue. This marriage of blues and Christianity is evident in one of House's most well-known songs, "Preachin' the Blues," first recorded in 1930 for Paramount Records in Grafton, Wisconsin. In the second part of the song, Son tackles what would become his lifelong struggle as he howled:¹⁵

Yeah, I'm gon' fold my arms , I'm gonna kneel down in prayer
Whoa, I fold my arms, gonna kneel down in prayer
When I get up I'm gonna leave my preachin blues laying there

Now I met the blues this morning, walking just like a man
Oh, walking just like a man
I said good morning blues, now give me you right hand

Now there ain't nothing now baby, Lord that's gon' worry my mind
Oh, Lord that's gon' worry my mind
I'm satisfied, I got the longest line

I got to stay on the job, I aint got no time to lose
Yeah, I aint got no time to lose
I swear to God, I got to preach these gospel blues

(Praise God almighty)

Oh, I'm gonna preach these blues and choose my seat and sit down
Whoa, I'm gonna preach these blues now and choose my seat and sit down
When the spirit comes, I want you to jump straight up and down.⁷

The song conveys an extremely headstrong personality, as if Son decided that he was going to take up the blues, he was going to use that platform to preach the Christian message, and furthermore, he felt an urgency to carry out his mission. "I ain't got no time to lose, I swear to God, I got to preach these gospel blues," cries House. The intentions and messages of the texts of House's blues canon are often difficult to decipher, and "Preachin' Blues" is no different. In this line, perhaps Son was voicing his resolution to marry the polar opposites of Christianity and the sinful Mississippi blues culture, and perhaps even the evil atmosphere of early twentieth century Mississippi for African-Americans as a whole.

If this was Son's intention, it reflects a much deeper understanding of the Christian faith than was characteristic of Deep South preachers and people in the early 20th Century. Beaumont notes that a Mississippi preacher essentially needed three things for success: literacy and having read the Bible, "getting religion," and having a strong voice¹⁶. While this job description suited House to a tee, it leaves

¹⁵ "Preachin' the Blues," Paramount, 1930.

¹⁶ Beaumont, 37.

little room for the complex message of Jesus Christ to seek out the low-spirited and poor of heart with a mind to affect spiritual change. Many preachers remained within the comfortable walls of their respective churches, enjoying a successful financial career surrounded by Christians who came for a weekly message. House took a different path, bringing the evangelical, experiential nature of Christianity straight to the alcoholics, harlots, gamblers, and rabble-rousers of the Mississippi juke joints; furthermore, it was his blues music setting that gave his message weight. All at once, listeners heard a man just like them, made weary by labor, discrimination, and suffering, preaching a veiled gospel in the most honest way he knew how. His brutal honesty made for an inescapable performance; his lyrics expressed a sincere personal struggle between a life of God and a life of vice. This surely affected African-Americans in Mississippi almost universally; religion was an integral part of African-American culture in Mississippi, but it must have been difficult to walk a Christian path when so much evil surrounded their daily lives, leading to the popular distractions of the flesh that did as much for the blossoming of blues music as any other facet of Mississippi history. Son House used his stage as a confessional, a confessional to which he would return countless times in his life.

Another take on such cryptic lyrics is much less idealistic. His last verse of “Preachin’ the Blues” depicts a truly strange type of conversion. “I’m gonna preach these blues now and choose my seat and sit down; when the spirit comes, I want you to jump straight up and down.”¹⁷ The finale of Son’s six minute internal battle, his last verse is quite veiled. While the whole song bears countless references to religion and a life of a pastor, this verse seems to take that rhetoric and apply it to an opposite end. Juke joints, where Son would have undoubtedly played these blues, were famous for their energy and dancing. Alan Lomax—an integral ethnomusicologist without whom blues culture in a broader sense may not even exist—observed in his book *The Land Where the Blues Began* the physical manifestation of “heat” produced by African-American heritage, music, and dance at Mississippi jukes and house parties: “it continues, just below the level of vision, in jukes, barrelhouses, and dance halls where black orchestras play for dancing. If you look closely, you can see the physical

17[¶]“Preachin’ the Blues,” Paramount 1930.

interplay between members of the band and between them and the folks on the floor.”¹⁸ It seems fitting that this culture, fueled by “the devil’s music,” produced a tangible, visible “heat.”

Given the character of these juke joints, it may be more likely that House was preaching religion in a completely different context. He demanded his dancing audience to hear his preaching blues, and to make sure everyone around him *knew* when their spirit was full—not necessarily full of religion, but rather, simply *full*—not unlike many accounts of people “getting religion,” which was a verbal depiction of an experiential change within the spirit of the self. Son saw the blues experience as a mirror image of religion in the South; equally experiential, Son was in the business of making his audience “get blues.” From this perspective, it is easy to see how Son so easily translated his faith struggle into blues culture, while simultaneously affecting the genre’s very core identity. Music, interpersonal connection, and experiential involvement were all integral aspects of Christianity in the Deep South; so too were they integral for the relentless character of the blues. This link may also be the root of House’s lifelong war between his vices and his faith, as well as the root of that same dichotomy within Mississippi’s own history and identity; when both sides of the looking glass employed almost the same methods of enrichment, how could House possibly separate the two within his own worldview?

¹⁸Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Pantheon, 1993) 332.

III: GETTING BLUES

Son had not experienced this inner struggle until around 1927, when he would have been about twenty-seven himself. Until then, a devout faith and a detestation of the blues characterized House's life; he was "churchified."¹⁹ This was also the same time during which House began his career as a *true* pastor, having finally completed the essential step of "getting religion." House recalled the morning in an alfalfa field, "Dew was falling. And man I prayed and I prayed and I prayed and—for wait a while, I hollered out. Found out then: I said 'Yes, it is something to be got, too, 'cause I got it now!'"²⁰ While Son had preached in churches since he was fifteen, it was not until this moment that he could truly call himself a pastor; however, his life in Christ (and the financial success that accompanied it) and his denunciation of the blues would not last. Around the same time, Son began drinking alcohol.²¹ He observed, "I began to wonder how can I stand up there in the pulpit and preach to them, tell them how to live, and quick as I dismissed the congregation, I'm doing the same thing."²² His personal struggle had taken root, causing a departure from his life in the church and creating a dilemma as to what he would do next: his growing guilt over his alcoholism kept him out of the pulpit, and his headstrong opposition to the Mississippi sharecropping system left him with very few options. As Beaumont noted, "by 1927, Eddie 'Son' House was a man ready for a change."²³

¹⁹Jeff Tilton, "Living Blues Interview: Son House," 15.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Luigi Monge, "Preachin' the Blues: a Textual Linguistic Analysis of Son House's "Dry Spell Blues" in *Ramblin' On My Mind*, ed. David Evans. (University of Illinois, Champagne-Urbana, 2008) 228.

²²Mark Humphrey, "Prodigal sons," in *Saints and Sinners: Religion, Blues and (D)evil in African-American Music and Literature*, ed. Robert Sacré. (University of Liege, 1991), 178.

²³Daniel Beaumont, *Preachin' the Blues*, 38.

A fateful year for House, at this point he had a second encounter with blues culture, but this time his guilt had left him newly unaffiliated. One Saturday evening in Mattson, Mississippi, Son stumbled upon a small house party where an audience surrounded a man playing blues music. That man was Rube Lacey, one of the forefathers of slide guitar blues. It makes sense then that a musical tool that would define Son's career was also the first thing to draw him in to blues music. He said of that meeting:

“Rube Lacey that's what started it. He's the guy that gave me the idea to start to playing with this bottleneck I didn't even know nothing about playing, but he's playing with the medicine bottle and I had started off trying it and I broke the thing and cut my finger.

I liked the sound of it so well, so I thought I would think of a better remedy than this so I thought of what I use now. I knew that wasn't going to break. He's the one who started me off to learning how to play the steel, yeah Rubin Lacey. That was a little place they called Mattson, Mississippi, just a little bit south of Clarksdale.”²⁴ Lacey was one of the true proto-blues musicians, belonging to the generation of Deep South musicians who provided a near direct link between the slave songs and field hollers of generations past to the emerging blues sound that grew throughout the twentieth century. He played with the likes of Tommy Johnson, Willie Wilson, and James McCoy, but Lacy made a handful (quite literally only five or six songs) of recordings that earned him very small but previously unmatched notoriety as a bluesman. Lacey recorded four songs for Columbia Records in Memphis, in December 1927, but none of these recordings are accessible today. The following March, Lacey recorded “Mississippi Jail House Groan” and “Ham Hound Crave” for Paramount Records. A pastoral background pervades Lacy's sparse recordings as well, as the listener can hear foot-stomps and moaning, wailing vocal styles that would become a staple of the sound and character of Son House as well as the broader genre of Delta blues.

James McCoy's name is present as frequently as Lacy's in regard to House's blues conversion experience. Beaumont argues that McCoy was the one who taught House his seminal “My Black Mama” (which Robert Johnson would later rework as his “Walkin' Blues,” and Muddy Waters with his “Country Blues”²⁵), as well as

²⁴Bob West, “From the Vaults: Bob West Interview with Son House,” *Paramount Records*, 1968, <http://paramountshome.org/articles/Spotlight/BR207%20Son%20House.pdf> (March 18, 2014)

²⁵Waters' performance of his “Country Blues” for Alan Lomax's Library of Congress recordings in 1941 prompted the conversation in which Waters

“Preachin’ the Blues,” two blues tunes that would become integral to House’s catalog. Separate from his conversation with Bob West, during which House credits Lacey with playing the guitar that hooked him, House in a 1965 interview with John Fahey (three years prior to the West interview) gives credit to both McCoy and Lacey:

“A guy by the name of James McCoy. . . And the first guy that I paid attention to get my mind on trying to learn to play guitar was a guy by the name Ruben Lacy. And he was the first guy, him and this other guy I just mentioned, was the first I see play with this slide. Now they used medicine bottles.”²⁶

Along with Lacy and McCoy, House cited Willie Wilson as yet another early influence upon his musical career. In a third interview, it was Wilson and Lacy that piqued House’s interest that evening in Mattson. Including no mention of McCoy, House recalled to interviewer Julius Lester in 1965:

“I started playing guitar in 1928, but I got the idea around about 1927. I saw a guy named Willie Wilson and another one named Reuben Lacy. All before then, I just hated to see a guy with a guitar. I was so churchy! I came along to a little place they call Mattson, a little below Clarksdale.”²⁷

The disparity between these accounts of Son’s blues conversion could stem from his alcoholism; by the time he crossed paths with these musicians, House’s drinking problem had already grown enough to deem himself unworthy of preaching to a congregation. Given this hazed state of mind in 1927 as well as the interviews coming nearly thirty years after the events, it is easy to see how the details surrounding House’s change of heart were foggy. The result, though, was very clear. Beaumont observes three commonalities between the accounts: “the suddenness of House’s change of heart; his dedication to his new profession; and his awareness that, whatever the future would bring, he had taken a momentous step that would change his life.”²⁸

Alan Lomax possibly reached the origin of these accounts while on his Mississippi Delta recording odyssey for the Library of Congress from 1941 to 1942.

Lomax had already heard Muddy Waters drop the name of his predecessor, and in Lomax’s preliminary conversations with House, he got an account that points almost expresses to Lomax the influence of Son House on Waters and Robert Johnson. The conversation was also the first time Lomax learned of House’s existence. ²⁶ Son House, interview with John Fahey, Barrett Hansen, and Mark Levine, Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, May 7, 1965.

²⁷ Lester, Julius. “I Can Make My Own Songs: An Interview With Son House.” *Sing Out!* vol. 15 no. 3 (July 1965), 38-47.

²⁸ Beaumont, *Preachin’ the Blues*, 43.

directly to Wilson. Son recalled a regal blues lineage to Lomax: “How it come about that he played Lemon’s style is this—Little Robert learnt from me, and I learnt from an old fellow they call Lemon down in Clarksdale, and he was called Lemon because he had learnt all Blind Lemon’s pieces off the phonograph.”²⁹ Willie Wilson was the one they called Lemon, a fact that also emerged in Lomax’s conversations with Son House. Given this conversation, and the date upon which it transpired, it may be most likely that Wilson was Son House’s predominant guitar teacher as opposed to Ruben Lacey.

House’s first involvement with these characters was likely with Wilson and McCoy, who House befriended during his descent into alcoholism—a moment which coincided with the first dissolution of his career as a preacher. Al Wilson, the legendary lead singer of 1960s blues rock band Canned Heat, who helped in refreshing House’s musicianship following his rediscovery and who wrote an article concerning House and his music, noted the three’s inclination toward “general revelry”³⁰ as House would frequently join McCoy and Wilson in their evenings of drinking and playing music for house parties. These soirees preceded House’s Mattson conversion story, which begs the question of what changed within the man’s spirit between these nights of music and drinking and the Mattson evening when House heard the siren blues music that took an eternal hold upon his life and psyche.

It is worth noting that Lacey—who, along with Wilson, fueled House’s attraction to and education in the slide guitar style of blues—left the genre in the 1930s altogether to pursue a career in preaching.³¹ While little is known about Lacey’s life, it seems that he experienced blues culture and Christianity in a much more separated fashion than House, similar to the paranoid attitudes of other blues musicians at the time who saw their involvement in blues culture as a conscious risk, perhaps even a conscious assurance, of eternal damnation. For Lacy and many others, a connection between his religious spirit and the blues music he played was evident, but he could not see a way for these two opposing ideologies to coexist. Instead, the relationship was one that called for devotion to one and the abandonment of the other.

²⁹ Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 16.

³⁰ Al Wilson, “Son House: an analysis of his music and a biography,” *Blues Unlimited*, Collectors Classics 14, Reprints Vol. 3 (October 1966), 2.

³¹ Beaumont, *Preachin’ the Blues*, 42.

House's early life agreed with this notion. It was not until his late twenties (around 1927, within a year of stepping down from the pulpit due to his own guilt), when he heard Lacey's blues as a newly unaffiliated man, that he felt a desire to play the blues. It is interesting that the blues that "converted" House were the blues of a man who utilized the same preaching style for which House would become a legend; the interpersonal war of Christianity and vice that defined House's career was the same war that lured him in in the first place. Perhaps the key to the perpetuation of influential ideas is in symmetry. Religious consciousness and influence upon blues music was present, but it was waiting for someone to establish the inseparable connection between the two notions; rather, it was waiting for someone to *recognize* that inseparability. House provided the symmetry for Lacey and his contemporaries' black and white notions of blues and religion. He was an evolved parallel of Lacey; instead of *leaving* blues to make peace with God, perhaps House sought to reconcile himself with God *through* his blues music, a notion that would do much to craft the almost confessional nature of blues music and culture.

IV: A WHOLE LOTTA MOUTH

House began his career as a performing blues musician at this time, around 1927, completely immersing himself in his new craft. Comparing the details of his “getting religion” in the alfalfa field and his blues conversion in Mattson, the nature of both experiences were strikingly similar, especially when one considers the general belief of House’s time and place that blues culture and Christianity were completely incompatible notions—oil and water. And yet, for House, they were not so different at all. He immersed himself completely in the lifestyle of blues music, and while he had already begun his lifelong tango with whiskey and women, the blues were much more than that for House. House was in the unique position to recognize the core similarities between blues music and the Christian lifestyle that he had laid aside, and his treatment of the blues within a highly religious mindset suggests that he indeed recognized this connection and sought to perpetuate it with his blues. The pursuit of this connection, the exploration of an inner struggle between right and wrong, cemented House’s place as a revolutionary musician, the true father of the Delta blues.

House learned to play his legendary slide guitar blues in unbelievably quick fashion, again reflecting the devotional attitude of House’s religious background and that background’s influence upon his career as a bluesman. Willie Moore, a friend of House, noted that it took “a whole lotta mouth” to be a preacher, and House had it. That strength of voice translated into a form of blues performance that affected audiences in a much more experiential fashion than previous generations of blues performers had accomplished. Lomax had already observed the energetic, enigmatic, interpersonal connection that was present in some of the Mississippi Hill Country juke joints and house parties between the audience and the performers; this form of Mississippi blues was much more in line with African heritage, as musicians like Fred McDowell placed heavy focus on rhythm and “groove,” utilizing African instruments like the fife and drum. However, the house parties in this area differed from the Mississippi Delta in that a group of performers usually played together to achieve a more layered sound, effectively providing the soundtrack for the “heat” that Lomax observed in these scenes. In Delta jukes, while bluesman often performed together,

the focus was not the same; House and his companions' blues were much more Delta-centric, reflecting at once the terror of the labor system, the legal slavery of Parchman, and the experience of the African-American within that society. However, the jukes took that same experience and made it a weekly ramble.

The juke joint frequenters had resigned themselves to inescapable damnation in this world and the next, but they did not yet see that the juke experience was diluting their trials into a sliver of hope. "There was no dance floor as such," recalled integration hero James Meredith in his memoir, *Three Years in Mississippi*, "the dance floor was everywhere."³² The relentless spirit of African-American culture in Mississippi was a hotbed of positive energy, and it took a preaching, evangelistic bluesman like Son House to draw out such a significant aspect of the blues experience in Mississippi and convey that culture's unmatched resilience.

³²James Meredith, *Three Years in Mississippi*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 35.

V. TROUBLE IN THE JUKES

Not long into House's juke joint career, he met with the trouble he always knew was present on those weekend ruckuses. House knew well the character of those Saturday evenings at juke joints and house parties, recalling in his interview with Bob West concerning Robert Johnson's presence there at such a young age:

"I gave him a good chastisement about how it is in playing for these old Saturday night balls and things. You were likely to get hurt or killed because along at that time that was happening very regular. Nearly every other Saturday night or two somebody got stabbed or got shot or something. It wasn't much to it in those days."³³ In one of the most contested stories in blues lore, Son House found himself in such an altercation one night in 1928, which could not have been more than a year after his blues career began. A conversation between House and blues historian Stephen Calt revealed House's account of the night. Beaumont summarizes:

"House told Calt that he was at a Saturday night house party in Lyon with a girlfriend named Cornelius, when a fight broke out between two men. One of the men, Sam Allen, was a friend of House. The other man was Leroy Lee, then unknown to House. When the shooting started, House was outdoors with an uncle who got hit by a stray bullet that broke his ankle. Hearing the shots, House, who was armed with a .32 automatic, crawled indoors through a broken window, getting cut on the neck in the process. Once he was inside, House shot Lee, in defense of his friend Sam Allen he claimed. Allen however left the scene. House then took his uncle to a doctor in Jonestown."³⁴

This account offers little to no factual evidence as to what truly transpired that Saturday evening, but it is fact that the altercation earned House a conviction of killing Leroy Lee and a five year sentence on Parchman Farm, the storied Mississippi state penitentiary that all but resurrected slave labor and exponentially multiplied profits for the Mississippi sharecroppers who sat atop the brutal system. Blues historian Ted Gioia said of the prison, "For Parchman officials, prisoners were moneymakers rather than mere criminals, and profit maximization was the rule of the day. During its first half century, Parchman could boast that its convicts were the second greatest source of income for the state of Mississippi; only tax receipt generated more dollars."³⁵ Alan Lomax saw the face of Parchman firsthand during his time in Mississippi in the 1940s. He appropriately contextualized the horrors of Parchman within the horrors of Mississippi life in general for the African-American:

³³ Bob West Interview With Son House.

³⁴ Beaumont, *Preachin' the Blues*, 46.

³⁵ Ted Gioia, *Delta Blues: The Life and Times of the Mississippi Masters who Revolutionized American Music*, W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y., p. 87

“True, Parchman was a step deeper into hell, but he had lived in one of hell’s anterooms all his life and as a boozier, a dancer, a petty gambler—a chief devil in the eyes of the community—was well acquainted with the territory. But the pen soon taught him how wrong he was. It was a Marine boot camp where you never made private; boot camp that ran as long as a man’s sentence, and that could mean the rest of his life.”³⁶

Lomax’s account of what he saw at Parchman Farm is one of the most horrific narratives to emerge from the storied evil of Deep South racism. He evoked images of “the bat,” a penal tool for mercilessly beating convicts, sometimes to death, that should have died alongside the cotton kingdoms of 1850 that utilized such torturous punishment methods. However, Parchman made it clear that those kingdoms were still very much alive. Lomax likened Parchman to Nazi concentration camps, pointing out the pervasive reputation of the penitentiary that cast an inescapable shadow of intimidation over the entire state of Mississippi, coupled with the unorthodox methods of pure cruelty that penitentiary guards and “nigger drivers” utilized in their penal bloodlust.³⁷ The account Lomax gave provided an all too real impression of a state almost a century removed from the institution of slavery, yet overwhelmingly and horrifically still in the very same disposition.

This is not all that Lomax took away from his Parchman experience, though. He recognized the spirit of the incarcerated men, a spirit that no bat or driver could tarnish. It was music, and the communal experience of singing that music, that perpetuated these convicts’ souls in a place that had none. Lomax recalled, “In the burning hell of the penitentiaries the old comforting, healing, communal spirit of African singing cooled the souls of the toiling, sweating prisoners and made them, as long as the singing lasted, consolingly and powerfully one.”³⁸ This sentiment reflects the idea that music has served an almost sacred purpose in the world of African-Americans in American history, working as an effective experiential outlet for community, solace, and hope.

House entered this Hell on Earth for the murder of Leroy Lee. John Fahey’s 1965 interview of Son House (accompanied by Fahey’s colleagues Barret Hansen and Mark Levine) focuses on House’s time and experiences in Parchman. House’s recounting of the penitentiary in 1929-1930 mirror the impressions the place had on Alan Lomax, except House’s perceptions came from a convict who experienced the

³⁶ Lomax, *Land Where the Blues Began*, 257.

³⁷ Ibid., 258.

³⁸ Ibid., 258.

evils of the penitentiary firsthand, whereas Lomax could only observe. In particular, Fahey interrogated House about a Parchman figure that appeared in House's 1942 "Country Farm Blues." The song is perhaps one of House's darkest lyrical moments, revealing at once the resounding evil that festered inside Parchman as well as the great depth of emotions that House himself possessed. The verse in question reads:

"Put you down under a man called Cap'n Jack
Put you down under a man called Cap'n Jack
Put you under a man called Captain Jack,
He'll sure write his name up and down your back."³⁹

House revealed in the interview that Captain Jack was indeed a "prison driver," but not an employee of Parchman Farm. Rather, this character met House at the Tunica County Farm, which was a prison farm that bore the same characteristics as Parchman. Even House, who showed an intensity of emotion concerning almost every aspect of his life, seemed dulled to the ways of the prison guards. Fahey inquired about the line, "he'll sure write his name up and down your back." Perhaps due to the rhetorical nature of the question, House curtly responded, "That means beat you."⁴⁰ In the same interview, he summarized his time under the cruel prison guards saying, "I'm so well acquainted with Captain Jack, it's a pity."⁴¹

While this conversation revealed House's encounters with the enforcers of his time in prison, the most peculiar aspect of House's time was the speed in which it ended. Sentenced to five years, presumably for manslaughter, although none of the court records still exist, House was out of prison and Clarksdale by 1930; this is evident from the Paramount recordings he made that same year in Grafton, Wisconsin. Depending on the timeline one follows of House's life in 1927-29, he would have been a Parchman prisoner for no more than a year and a few months. In the Fahey interview, House provided an answer:

"The man I was working for, he was a big shot. He stood good with the people, and they went by what he said. And he told them to be light on me . . . If you stand all right and amount to something, the judge and everybody going to do just like you [the planter, that is] say . . . My people, all of them or most of them, was raised up and worked for his daddy for a long time . . . my daddy was always a blacksmith for him. That's why he knew him too and he thought very much of the family. So that's why he made it light on me."⁴²

³⁹Son House, "Country Farm Blues," *1941-42 Library of Congress Recordings*, Son House, *Travelin' Man*, CD, 1996.

⁴⁰Fahey, "Interview," 1965

⁴¹*Ibid.*

In regard to this response, House's father was good—if for nothing else—for ensuring the good reputation of the House family name to the extent that this well-respected planter could use his local influence to protect House from any fatal treatment during his prison time. Sure enough, a Clarksdale judge released House from his sentence, advising him to leave the Clarksdale area for good. House recalled in an interview with Stephen Calt and Gayle Wardlow, “I told him I could cover as much territory as a red fox if he turned me loose.”⁴³ This order mobilized House, who found a home in Lula, Mississippi, about fifteen miles north of Clarksdale.

VI. A CHANGE OF FATE

In a moment of fate, House began playing for tips upon his arrival at Lula. Amongst the crowd was one Charley Patton, a larger than life bluesman who called Dockery Plantation, the historic “birthplace of the blues” between Ruleville and Cleveland, Mississippi, his home. Patton was a descendant of the Chatmon family, who were widely influential in the early development of blues music. Also in the crowd was café owner and bootlegger Sara Knights, who extended an invitation to House to play in front of her store to attract customers to both her legal and illicit businesses. The inclination to drink was strong within House, so this suited him well.

While he played for Knights, Patton noticed the large following House had gathered, and the two became fast friends as they identified with each other's soft spots for liquor and women. The two collaborated and played a handful of shows together around the Delta, effectively circumventing the odious lifestyle that accompanied sharecropping as well as providing House with integral time in the company of one of the earliest blues masters. Patton must have been impressed with House's vocal style as well as his innovative slide guitar. Blues historian Elijah Wald wrote, “House certainly admired Patton, and played some Patton pieces, but the slide

⁴²Stephen Calt and Gayle Wardlow, *The King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton*. Newton, N.J.: Rock Chapel Press, 1988, 210.

⁴³Calt and Wardlow, *The King of the Delta Blues*, 211..

style for which he is most famous, and which was what both Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters were most struck by in his playing, bears virtually no stamp of Patton's influence."⁴⁴

House's career in Lula was vastly successful, earning the praise of locals and bluesmen alike. Beaumont argues for the end of House's life as a Christian when he arrived in Lula. He posits, "House had lost religion. Now he 'got' art. The strange sound of the bottleneck guitar that captivated him was the sound of a door opening—but it was also the sound of a door that was closing behind him."⁴⁵ Beaumont's argument overlooks a key aspect of House's character and the character of the state that raised him. While House abandoned the church in word and deed, that part of his identity was *never* gone from his psyche; this is evidenced by the man's constant evocation of homily-like monologues to introduce his songs and to fill holes in live sets,⁴⁶ and more immediately on the 1930 Paramount recordings for which he performed his seminal "Preachin' Blues," perhaps the most obvious example of House's juxtaposition of his life in Christ and his life in sin. This juxtaposition is characteristic of Mississippians as a whole, who grapple all their lives with the same problems House's music so beautifully encapsulated. This battle is present for many, but perhaps it takes a place like Mississippi to draw out that personal conflict. Perhaps the Faulkner adage is right: to understand the world, one must first understand a place like Mississippi. Beaumont's account of House is rich, telling, and thorough, but it might have been difficult for a historian from the northwest to identify with the backward, contradictory yet perfectly collocated identity present among Mississippians and their omnipresent mother, Mississippi herself.

While House was at Parchman, Patton was reaching an apex in his blues career, earning the attention of Jackson general store owner, blues promoter, and local legend H.C. Speir. Speir worked as a blues talent scout for different record companies who sought blues musicians to record their music for sale, and he organized Patton's visit to Paramount Records' headquarters in Grafton, Wisconsin for a blues recording.

⁴⁴Eljah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Amistad, 2004), 158.

⁴⁵Beaumont, *Preachin' the Blues*, 56.

⁴⁶Son House, *The Oberlin College Concert: 1991*, Blue Moon, CD, 1999.

The record was a success, leading Paramount to invite Patton back for a second go-round. This time, Patton invited his new friend Son.

VII. THE PARAMOUNT RECORDINGS

That spring, one Arthur Laibley travelled to Lula to tap the Mississippi blues market. Laibley had been the recording director for Paramount Records—a subsidiary of the Wisconsin Chair Company—since 1925 after taking over for Maurice Supper, who began Paramount’s exploration into “race records” of the Deep South in 1922. Blind Lemon Jefferson, the Texas blues legend who influenced scores of Mississippi bluesmen including Willie Wilson, Son House, and Robert Johnson, was a shining star of Paramount’s blues endeavors, and his 1929 death created new pressure for Laibley to fill his gigantic shoes, especially after a spell of unsuccessful records under Laibley’s direction. Furthermore, many of the bluesmen who journeyed to Grafton were unable to curb their alcoholism, resulting in a very small amount of usable cuts, and an even smaller amount of quality ones. In comparison, Patton’s first recording session yielded 14 sides in three different tunings in just a day of recording.⁴⁷ This left Patton as the sole torchbearer of Paramount’s blues reputation.

So, as Laibley moved through Lula to reach Texas, his short meeting with Patton resulted in a second trip to Grafton. As Beaumont noted, “and now Patton’s

⁴⁷Calt and Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues*, p. 214

good fortune was House's good fortune as well."⁴⁸ While House's local fame was burgeoning, his success in the recording business may have never taken shape had it not been for this intricate trail of timing and fortune for his new friend from Dockery. A beautiful reflection of quaint, small town Mississippi, House observed Laibley and Patton's conversation from across the street, as another face in the impoverished crowd. House said of the conversation:

"After he left, Charlie come on 'cross there [i.e., the main street of the town] and told me what he said . . . Charlie told him about me . . . so he told Charlie that he wanted me to come with him. I said: 'What?' He say: 'Yeah, he want you to come with me.' I say: 'Yeah, sho' I go, man.'"⁴⁹

Here was Laibley, a clear outsider thanks to his crisp business suit, Midwestern accent, and polite treatment of blacks in Mississippi, whose job was to search for the best blues talent he could find. The story of House that Patton relayed to him must have been almost mythical in nature to the man, hearing one of his recording stars describe a bluesman who sang with a captivating wail and a never-before-heard style of slide guitar. Perhaps stories like these felt to Laibley like the tall tales of Davy Crockett or John Henry; and like those tall tales, the truth behind them was very human yet somehow even more mythic, and much closer to its source than it seemed. In Laibley's case, the man behind Patton's blues tall tale was within a stone's throw. Laibley left \$100 for Patton's expenses, and the duo embarked on their pilgrimage about a week later, accompanied by Willie Brown, who was likely House's closest friend and collaborator, and one of Charley Patton's girlfriends, Louise Johnson. House recalled she and Patton's symmetry: "she didn't do nothin' but drink and play music; she didn't work for nobody."⁵⁰

The trip was all but ordinary. Whiskey flowed, which rendered tongues and attitudes volatile. To quantify the nature of the trip, one instance in Illinois resulted in Patton and Brown forcing Wheeler Ford—their driver and owner of the Buick that transported the bluesmen—to stop his vehicle on the side of the highway for the two to get out and settle their argument over a fistfight. Brown exited the car first, followed by Patton who carried his brand new Stella guitar with him. The alcohol got

⁴⁸Beaumont, *Preachin' the Blues*, p. 58

⁴⁹Calt and Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues*, p. 212-213

⁵⁰Calt and Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues*, 216.

to Patton first, though, as he tripped out of the car and fell. House hilariously recalled, “Willie jumped out first ahead of Charley, and then Charley jumped out with his new guitar. He fell right flat on it beside the road, just as flat as a patty cake right along side the road. He didn’t even get to play one piece on it. And man, he cussed and he swore!”⁵¹

The rambunctious group arrived in Grafton, and met up with the Paramount staff and made their beds in a boarding house on Paramount’s premises.⁵² Beaumont summarized the recording studio and process:

“By 1930, ‘state-of-the-art’ recording equipment was used in the Grafton studio: parabolic microphones, an amplifier, and loudspeaker. All recording was ‘live.’ If the musician made an error, he had to do another take. A ten-inch 78-rpm record could hold about three minutes of music, and when ten seconds were left, a light went on to warn the performer that he needed to finish the take . . . usually two takes were done . . . to vary the tempo of the song, a factor that might decide which version was released for commercial sales.”⁵³

Son House recorded “Walking Blues,” “My Black Mama (parts 1 and 2),” “Dry Spell Blues (parts 1 and 2),” “Preachin’ the Blues (parts 1 and 2),” Mississippi County Farm Blues,” and “Clarksdale Moan” for Paramount during this 1930 Grafton adventure. These songs, especially “Preachin’ the Blues” and “Dry Spell Blues,” would become staples of House’s repertoire, as he still performed them in the 1960s and 1970s following his rediscovery. In the years following the 1930 Paramount recordings, Paramount Records fired Laibley due to a lack of quality production, but the company itself went bankrupt in 1934.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Fahey, “Interview.”

⁵² Beaumont, *Preachin’ the Blues*, 62.

⁵³ Ibid., 63.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 74.

VIII. ROBERT JOHNSON, MUDDY WATERS, AND EVIE GOFF

Immediately following the Paramount adventure, House, Patton, and Brown emerged as the faces of Mississippi Delta Blues and dominated the juke joint and house party scene. This was likely the most tumultuous period in House's life, which is no easy feat to accomplish. With company like Patton and the addictive nature of House, sins of the flesh were simply inescapable. House and his companions made their own corn liquor constantly, and drowned themselves in it every chance they had. In an interview with Jeff Titon, House mentions that some of the ones who could not drink all their whiskey sold the remaining alcohol to friends for money. However, House never had this issue.⁵⁵

House also met Robert Johnson for the first time around 1930. Johnson would have been about nineteen years old, but House and his friends took him to be much younger. House recalled in an interview with Julius Lester:

"He started his round about between fifteen and sixteen years old . . . We'd play for Saturday night balls and there'd be this little boy standing around. That was Robert Johnson . . . He blew a harmonica and he was pretty good at that, but he wanted to play a guitar."⁵⁶

Often, House and Brown would play for jukes and take a break in between sets.

While the main act slipped off for a drink, Johnson would sneak to the stage and grab a guitar. "They'd come out and say, 'Why don't y'all go in there and get that guitar

⁵⁵Titon, "Interview: Son House," 14.

⁵⁶Lester, "My Own Songs," 1965, 41.

away from that boy! He's runnin' people crazy with it.'"⁵⁷ In this light, it is easy to see how such a myth as selling one's soul to the Devil at the corner of Highway 49 and 61 could have been accepted. The shock of Johnson's emergence as such an enigmatic performer must have been very real; Robert Johnson's audience had seen him play before, and it wasn't pretty, so maybe some kind of black magic *was* afoot.

This is one of the most beloved stories in the blues canon, but its root is much more human and perhaps equally idyllic. Son House's slide guitar was behind Robert Johnson's evolution, and House's instruction was at its core. "He just wanted to learn how to play," House remembered, "so I said, 'You just wait until this is over and maybe Sunday night or Monday night you come on over to the house and I'll give you some little sketches of it.' He called me 'Mr. Son.' He said, 'All right, okay, Mr. Son.'"⁵⁸ One could easily envision the eccentric House and Brown laughing to themselves, whiskey in hand, each week about this little Johnson boy coming around the bars. Likewise, House and Johnson sitting together within the intimate setting of House's small Mississippi home provides a beautifully real backdrop to what might be the birth of modern blues. This was the scene for the transference of traditional blues by House, the champion of early Mississippi Delta blues, to Johnson, the innovative genius who would take that style and lay the foundation for its globalization.

The case for House as the ancestor of blues music's globalization is even more evident with another of his disciples: McKinley Morganfield, better known as Muddy Waters. He lived on Stovall Plantation for much of his life, and was obsessed with the music and performance of Son House. He often cited House's overwhelming inspiration. In Jim Rooney's 1971 *Bossmen*, Waters noted: "my copy was Son House."⁵⁹ In an interview with Jim O' Neal and Amy van Singer, he said, "Son House was the daddy down there then . . . I thought Son House was the greatest guitar player in the world when I heard him because he was usin' that bottleneck style, and I loved that sound. Man. Son House."⁶⁰ A few years later, Alan Lomax would record both

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸West, "Bob West Interview with Son House," 6.

⁵⁹James Rooney, *Bossmen: Bill Monroe and Muddy Waters*, (De Capo Press, 1991), 107.

⁶⁰Jim O' Neal and Amy van Singer, *The Voice of the Blues*, (New York: Routledge, 2002) 159-60.

House and Waters for his Library of Congress recordings, which was the first time Waters found himself on a recording (he was only about nineteen years old at the time).

After a few years of blues, whiskey, women, and not much else, House met one Evie Goff in 1933. She had three children—Beatrice, Rufus, and Sally—by a previous marriage and she worked as a cook in Robinsonville. She and House began what would be the most dedicated relationship in his life. By 1934 he and Goff had married, and House had assumed the household duties of a father. Beatrice (now Bea Powell), who was four at the time of House and Goff's marriage, recalled: "He was good. He was a nice man. A real good father. He raised the three of us. He never did scold us. Never did whup one of us."⁶¹

Powell also recalled House's unflinching respect to Goff's devoutly religious mother, who lived in their home. He would never play blues at home, but he sometimes sang spirituals. Perhaps this was the environment that produced some of House's live staples, including covers of such spirituals as "John the Revelator," as well as his timeless a cappella "Grinnin In Your Face," which captures the primitive and honest nature of the spiritual. Powell also expressed that House and Willie Brown played in a juke joint almost every Saturday night, which undoubtedly included excessive alcohol consumption, but that House was very good about "compartmentalizing" his life; he kept all of his vices separate from his family. Goff must have been a very unique woman; she came from a very religious family like House, but she was in love with a rambler, and beyond that, she had the resounding patience to deal with his frequent transgressions. She even accompanied House to the juke joints on occasion. Goff and House remained married for the rest of his life.

In 1934, the same year of his marriage to Goff, Charley Patton died and House abandoned the pulpit entirely. Beaumont even surmises that he may have "never entered a church again in his life."⁶² This may be true, given the trajectory of House's life; following the early 1940s, House disappeared into obscurity and alcoholism until the mid-1960s, and dealt with his own problems until his death. However, following

⁶¹Bea Powell, interview with Daniel Beaumont, May 17, 2010. From Beaumont's *Preachin' the Blues*, 85.

⁶²Ibid.

his revived career in 1964, House would incorporate religious themes and monologues, spirituals, and his classic “religious blues” songs heavily into his live performances, again suggesting that his vocation was slightly less conventional than the pulpit allowed.

IX. 1941-42: ALAN LOMAX AND THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

RECORDINGS

House, apart from his matchless vocal style full of power and spirit, was perhaps most famous for his utilization of the bottleneck style of playing guitar. A precursor to the modern slide guitar, Mississippi bluesmen would break a glass bottle and slide their index finger into the neck, using the smooth glass surface to slide along the steel strings of a guitar. The result was a howling, relentless sound, an audible onomatopoeia for bluesmen’s constant suffering, unique identity, and unstoppable spirit.

The slide guitar style of blues emerged as a highlight of the genre, due in large part to Alan Lomax’s seminal 1941-’42 tour of the Mississippi Delta in search of the storied country blues musicians that resided there. During his fieldwork, Lomax recorded performances by Muddy Waters, “Honeyboy” Edwards, Son House, and others, all who practiced the handed down art of bottleneck slide guitar. To Lomax, House was an unknown figure; it seems odd that he was unaware of Art Laibley’s 1930 recordings of House, Charley Patton, and Willie Brown in Grafton, Wisconsin. Perhaps he was aware of House, but he did not want to hinder Waters’ own account of the man. Regardless, his seeming lack of familiarity yielded an important conversation between Lomax and Muddy Waters during their interviews in the 1941-42 Plantation Recordings, which Lomax recorded in Waters’ cabin on Stovall Farms near Clarksdale, Mississippi. The interview defined House as the root of both Johnson

and Waters' playing style, as they carried on House's legacy and formed a triumvirate of Mississippi country and slide guitar blues. Lomax asked Waters about the tune behind his "Country Blues," which Waters would eventually popularize as "I Feel Like Going Home." The conversation went as follows:⁶³

AL: What tune—other blues—do you remember, run to that same tune?
MW: Well this song come from the cotton field and a boy put the record out, Robert Johnson. He put it out "Walkin' Blues."
AL: What was the title he put it out under?
MW: He put it out, name of "Walkin' Blues."
AL: Uh, huh. Did you know the tune before he put it on the record, though?
MW: Yes, sir. I know the tune before I heard it on the record.
AL: Uh, huh, who'd you learn it from?
MW: I learn it from Son House.
AL: Son House, who's that?
MW: That's a boy pickin' guitar, (inaudible)...
AL: How old is Son House?
MW: I imagine Son, he's aged, he's about forty-somethin'." ²⁵

Without this simple exchange, Lomax may have never known to seek Son House out; while history suggests House's existence would eventually become common knowledge thanks to a hugely revived interest in blues culture, it was imperative that Lomax—one of the true geniuses in finding and documenting blues music and recognizing the genre's importance within the context of Mississippi and American history—make this connection during his time in the Delta. Lomax had an uncanny eye for seeing all that went into these blues, a sensitivity unique to Lomax among many blues historians. Lomax remarked of House's performance:

"*'Hitch up my black pony, saddle up my bay mare,'* he sang, his words conjuring up the nights of coupling in the tropical heat of Mississippi. His voice, guttural and hoarse with passion, ripping apart the surface of the music like his tractor-driven deep plow ripped apart the wet black earth in the spring-time, making the sap of the earth song run, while his powerful, work-hard hands snatched strange chords out of the steel strings the way they had snatched so many tons of cotton out of brown thorny cotton bolls in the fall. And with him the sorrow of the blues was not tentative, or retiring, or ironic. Son's whole body wept, as with eyes closed, the tendons in his powerful neck standing out with the violence of his feeling and his brown face flushing, he sang in an awesome voice the *Death Letter Blues*."

This recording session yielded about twenty tracks, including some of House's most famous songs like "Jinx Blues," "American Defense," "Pony Blues," and "Delta Blues."

Lomax, perhaps more than any blues historian, was aware of the deep connection Mississippi had with the music that oozed from her fields, her color line,

⁶³Muddy Waters, "Interview #1," *The Complete Plantation Recordings: 1941-42*, Chess Records, CD, 1993.

her poverty, her injustice. This was certainly due in large part to his presence in Mississippi in the early 1940s, when he saw firsthand the strange and backward way of life that years of hatred and cruelty had nurtured. Other blues researchers have made this connection as well, applying varying degrees of significance to the relationship between Mississippi's history and the history of blues music. One blues historian, Samuel Charters, perpetuated this type of blues contextualization, observing of House's 1930 recordings: "In the rhythms of the blues that Son House recorded in 1930 it was still possible to hear the rhythm of the axe strokes that had marked the work songs his blues had developed from."⁶⁴

Lomax's advantage was the approach with which he recorded and documented these Deep South musicians. He was one to completely immerse himself in the subject upon which he was focusing. For his blues recording, this meant conversing with these musicians in their own homes, and recording them there too. His approach was built upon the hopes of establishing a comfortable, intimate atmosphere; he watched as House and his friends drank liquor, talked among themselves, and played their music; he treated the men and women with respect and what must have been a never-before-seen colorblindness for these people who had only ever seen prejudice and cruelty from their fellow white citizens.

This immersion inevitably yielded Lomax's better understanding of the winding and intricate character of the state of Mississippi, as well as his understanding that Mississippi was perhaps more vital to the character of blues music and its performers than any other factor that contributed to its development. Furthermore, House's preaching style of blues coupled with his inner struggle between his faith and his vices illuminated and solidified this Mississippi blues connection for generations of blues musicians to follow, and served as the crossroads between the blues' ancestral field hollers, the experiential identity of blues culture, the sorrowful history of Mississippi's race relations, and an optimism in the future of the same Mississippi that had subjected its African-American citizens to such evil. Sam Chatmon, yet another early bluesman who influenced Son House's blues musically and lyrically, wailed:

"Lost all my money, ain't got a dime.
Bad luck and women, I'm leavin' them behind.

⁶⁴Samuel Charters, *The Blues Makers*, (New York: De Capo Press, 1967), 170.

But after all this hard travelin'
Things about comin my way.”⁶⁵

This same hopefulness worked its way into the heart of House’s blues performances.

In his “Dry Spell Blues,” from the 1930 Grafton, Wisconsin recordings, Son cried,

“Oh Lord have mercy if you please
Oh Lord have mercy if you please
Let your rain come down and give our poor hearts ease

These blues, these blues is worthwhile to be heard
Oh these blues is worthwhile to be heard
For it’s very likely bound to rain somewhere”⁶⁶

These early blues reflect the veiled optimism of blues culture that House’s religious background helped nourish. “Dry Spell Blues” is, at its heart, a prayer for rain, a desperate call for water—for life—at the end of a period of drought that had continued for far too long. This text reflects multiple aspects of blues music and history at once. A direct descendant of the slave songs and field hollers that kept time through laborious days in the Delta heat, Son’s “Dry Spell Blues” addressed what was a very tangible period of physical suffering and strife while also evoking a much deeper meaning behind his lyrics. African-Americans in Mississippi were praying for the end of a much longer, much more damaging drought than the one about which House sang in 1930. This is the drought that gave House’s blues their weight.

A clever listener knew that the “dry old spell” that existed everywhere House went was not just a period of drought in the Mississippi weather; it was a history of drought that Son experienced, that his ancestors experienced, and that he hoped his descendants would never experience: “I believe to my soul this old world is bound to end.”⁶⁷ His prayer is heartbreaking, revealing the immense depth of emotion and passion House and his fellow African-American citizens possessed, but his faith in humanity despite that tragedy is breathtaking, resoundingly encouraging and perhaps inherently Christian. This resolution to remain hopeful is present elsewhere in House’s catalog. “American Defense,” a truly extraordinary song concerning House’s opinions about World War II, echoed these ideals and perhaps had more to do with

⁶⁵ Lomax, *Land Where the Blues Began*, 385.

⁶⁶ Son House, “Dry Spell Blues Part 2,” Paramount Records 12990, 1930.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

his people's own war in the Deep South than it did with the war overseas.

“Oh the struggle sometime will upset your mind;

So you won't know just what to do.

Keep pushin' keep shovin', don't be angry be loving,

Be faithful and honest and true.

No use to shedding no tears, no use to having no fears

This war may last you for years.”⁶⁸

Given lyrics like these, it is hard to believe Son ever abandoned the pillars of his faith, even after he felt that his own shortcomings had forced him to abandon the pulpit. These lyrics, paired with House's religious background and the style of blues that that background produced, represented a turn in blues ideology from playing and listening to blues as an acceptance of tragedy and hopelessness, to using the blues as a vessel to take personal struggle, sorrow, and strife and turn them into something beautiful, complex, and hopeful. Son House's unique position made this attribute vital, and it is also the attribute that produces the blues' great paradox: blues music, centered on pain and suffering, is inherently optimistic, thanks to the relentless spirits of a group of people who met evil with resilience, transforming it into a tremendous avenue of personal expression, historical context, and intrepid optimism. His slide guitar playing style and vocal intensity made an unparalleled impact on blues music, but it was House's blues ideology that completely transformed the genre and distinguished Mississippi blues from the rest of the genre. Even in the worst of times, when an end to such hard times was nowhere in sight, House used the blues to preach his message that a new day would come, that “it's very likely bound to rain somewhere.”

This outlook found a hugely receptive audience in juke joints and house parties, and perhaps provided a more spiritually satisfying experience than church on Sunday mornings offered. And yet, this was the same audience who had all but

⁶⁸Son House, “American Defense,” *1941-42 Library of Congress Recordings*, *Travelin' Man*, CD, 1996.

written off the idea of salvation. “Whoa, I’m gonna preach these blues now and choose my seat and sit down / When the spirit comes, I want you to jump straight up and down,” howled House in his historic “Preachin’ Blues.” How did this style of blues performance resonate so effectively to an audience who consciously avoided the intermingling of religious spirituality and the human imperfections that blues culture magnified? James “Son” Thomas acknowledged of playing the blues, “It’s just the chance you take,”⁶⁹ as if involvement in this culture almost inevitably put the individual in a position of hopelessness. Son House had a different perspective. He said in 1964 of his decision to leave the pulpit:

“I says, well, I got to do something, ‘cause I can’t hold God in one hand and the Devil in the other one. Them two guys don’t get along together too well. I got to turn one of ‘em loose. So I got out of the pulpit. So I said the next time I make a record, I’m gon’ to name it ‘Preachin Blues.’ I’m preaching on this side and the blues on that side. I says, well, I’ll just put ‘em together and name it ‘Preachin’ Blues.’”⁷⁰

This is the battle, the inherent struggle between good and evil that manifested itself in every aspect of life, upon which Son House elaborated in his blues. This struggle was present in each member of House’s audience, as such a battle rages within the hearts of every individual. When House married his preaching characteristics to his blues performance, the union proved to be an electrifying and inescapable one.

⁶⁹James “Son” Thomas, interview with William Ferris, 1974, quoted in Jon Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil*, 55.

⁷⁰Son House at Wabash College, Indiana, on Nov. 23, 1964, quoted in Julius Lester, “I Can Make My Own Songs.”

X. DISAPPEARANCE, REDISCOVERY, REVIVAL

Following Lomax's recording sessions, Son House left Mississippi in 1943. It is very unclear what motivated his pilgrimage, but House packed his things and moved to Rochester, New York, slipping into almost complete obscurity for over two decades. He worked various jobs, claimed a handful of addresses, and found his way onto a police report as well. Beyond this, it is very difficult to track this period of House's life in any detail. In 1964, though, everything changed. Dick Waterman, Nick Perls, and Phil Spiro—three prevalent names in regard to the 1960s blues revival, which sought to invigorate renewed interest and promotion of blues culture—discovered House living at 61 Grieg Street, Rochester, NY, in the spring of 1964 on the heels of a very long, obsessive scouring of the Mississippi Delta for House and other early Mississippi bluesmen. House had developed a tremor in his hands, undoubtedly due to his alcoholism, which made it difficult to play music. He had made friends with one Joe Beard, though, who was a musician who lived in House's Grieg Street apartment building. Many believe House had to completely "relearn" his music from so long before, which is true in part. However, Beard recalled, "No, he could still play—he just didn't own a guitar."⁷¹

This clashes with the other story that falls around the same time in House's life. Upon his rediscovery, which would have almost perfectly coincided with House's new friendship with Beard, a young, white college student sat down with House to rehabilitate the old man's blues prowess. That student was Alan Wilson, better known as the Blind Owl of Canned Heat. Wilson, the lead singer of the 1960's blues rock outfit, was a huge fan of House and blues culture as a whole. He majored in music at Boston University, and wrote a handful of articles about House and other

⁷¹Beaumont, *Preachin' the Blues*, 164.

blues subjects. In 1971, a year after Wilson's tragic and untimely death, Canned Heat released *Hooker N' Heat*, a collaboration album with Mississippi blues legend John Lee Hooker. Wilson, a phenomenal harmonica player, was only alive for four tracks. Hooker—who holds a reputation of employing very complicated, unpredictable rhythms in his blues—commented on Wilson's playing: "I don't know how he follow me but he do . . . you musta been listenin' to my records all your life."⁷² As music promoter, blues legend, and Oxford Mississippi local Dick Waterman so eloquently noted: Wilson had the honor of teaching Son House "how to play like Son House."⁷³

Following this period of rehabilitation, House enjoyed a successfully revived career thanks to a renewed interest in blues across college campuses, and the emergence of music festivals like the Newport Folk Festival. House played shows until his death on October 19, 1988, in Detroit, Michigan, and he constantly evoked ideas of religion, Christianity, and the human struggle.

XI. CONCLUSION: SON HOUSE AND THE TRANSCENDENCE OF THE BLUES GENRE

Son House faced a choice of using his blues and his stage persona to incite his audience into succumbing to their sorrows and troubles, or to meet those trials with a resilient energy and a resolve to hope for a brighter future. Given his background, it is easy to guess which path House took. His songs inspired audiences in a genuine fashion, mirroring the experiential nature of his loud and rambunctious Sunday sermons. In the jukes, though, House found that he could connect with an audience in a way that the pulpit did not offer; these were the people facing the darkest of times

⁷²Wilson, Alan, "Burnin' Hell," *Hooker N Heat*, Canned Heat, Liberty/Elektra, 1971.

⁷³Rebecca Davis, "Child is Father to the Man," *Blues Access Magazine*, 1998.

who belonged to the darkest of social circles—people who had given up on themselves and their situations—and House was inspiring them in a way they might not have thought possible. While the crime and danger never left, House’s music helped transition the jukes from aimless expenditures of money and morals to weekly revivals for the self-proclaimed wanderers who were simply beyond saving. House reminded blacks in Mississippi that one could never wander too far; as long as there was a future, there was hope. This notion resonated with his juke joint audiences, as it did not necessarily require belief in salvation by God, but rather a very basic belief that life would some day be brighter; a belief which manifested itself in juke joints and house parties through the experiential nature of House’s blues performances. He engrained a sense of hope—faith in something unseen—in blues music and culture, ultimately never leaving his post as a preacher, but simply changing the pulpit. Using his own history, the history of his people, and that history within the identity of his Mississippi home, House managed to place core Christian principles at the heart of blues music without his general audience ever noticing.

The communal music of African heritage that according to Lomax “brought daylight into the swamps of the Delta” served an important role in the culture and history of African-Americans in the Deep South dating back to the institution of slavery’s genesis in America. However, Lomax argued this music dissolved as the plantation communities dissolved, giving way to a more individual approach to music. “Individual performance types, like the solo gospel song, the holler, and blues, became fashionable among the maids, farm laborers, and service workers, struggling to climb the lowest rungs of the ladder of American success.”⁷⁴ This suggests that music for enriching and emboldening the community gave way to music for personal gain and recognition; if nothing else, it was simply another way for poor blacks in Mississippi to make a slightly better financial living while also avoiding the intense cruelties of the sharecropping system.

The earliest Mississippi bluesmen, like Ruben Lacy, Willie Wilson, James McCoy, and even Charley Patton, represent this lull in musical significance in favor of musical performance as a means to a financially successful end. Charley Patton, one of House’s earliest blues contemporaries, was a shameless proponent of this

⁷⁴Lomax, *Land Where the Blues Began*, p. 259

attitude. In an interview with Nick Perls, who was among the group of blues researchers to rediscover House in Rochester, New York in 1964, House had this to say of Patton's aimlessness:

"He'd take all them old foolish songs and things . . . some of them would sound all right . . . some of them had a meaning to them . . . some didn't. That's the way he played. He'd just say anything, the first thing he could think of . . . "Hey baby" . . . "Aw sho" . . . and all that old kind of funny stuff . . . Oh yeah, we often tell him too. Say 'Charley, you outta stop so much that ol' foolish messin' around.' 'Oh man, all I want to do is get paid for it. What's the difference?' I'd say, 'Yeah, but it just sounds so foolish and a lot of junk to it.' Patton—'What's the difference, man?' I'd say, 'OK, that's your little red wagon.'"⁷⁵

House could not make sense of this kind of blues music, this blues without a purpose. This is a direct reflection of the unflinching intensity of House's character and spirit, which led him so deep into the pulpit and then so deep into the heart of blues culture, and finally into the complete deconstruction of his conceptions of those establishments. House promoted an inherently Mississippian idea that these cultures and ideologies were inseparable. This notion is evidenced in his lifelong employment of Christian principals and themes at the very heart of blues music—music that had served so long as the pure antithesis of a Christian lifestyle.

Perhaps House's characteristic, rambling, religious tangents and spiritual performances were not a battle so much as they were the culmination of his hyper-ministry to the underworld of society. Charles Johnson, a black sociologist, described this "underworld" in 1941:

"It is composed of individuals who fall outside the recognized and socially sanctioned class categories, that is, those persons who are free from the demands of society—the 'wide' people, satisfied with their status, the 'outcasts,' the 'bad niggers,' prostitutes, gamblers, outlaws, renegades, and 'free' people."⁷⁶

This was the audience that Son House chose to evangelize. However, his message was not exactly one of salvation through Christ, but rather simply of salvation in some context. His preaching background incited a hugely experiential effect within the hearts of his audience, an effect that has yet to find an exact duplicate, as if he simply wanted to assure these people that they could do more, and hope for more, with their lives; while sins of the flesh were all around and evil surrounded their lives, that *never* equated to a throwaway life. This belief led to Son House transforming the blues genre into a crystallized form of the slave songs and field hollers from which it

⁷⁵Nick Perls, "Son House Interview. Part One," *78 Quarterly*, Vol. 1, 1967, 60.

⁷⁶Charles S. Johnson, *Growing Up In the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South*, (Washington D.C.: 1941; New York: Shocken Books, 1967), 76.

descended; under House's influence, Mississippi blues music and culture became a type of sacred secularism. It did not matter who these people were, or even what they believed, all that mattered was that they experience a change within themselves, a feeling of hope that had been absent from their previous life.

Paul Tillich was one of the most influential theological philosophers of the twentieth century, with one of his main arguments concerning the notion of a "New Being." Tillich, a Christian, argued that religious affiliation—or even secular affiliation—was irrelevant in regard to the New Being; all that mattered was the manifestation of this new reality in place of humanity's old one. Tillich writes, "What is this New Being? The New Being is not something that simply takes the place of the Old Being. But it is a renewal of the Old which has been corrupted, distorted, split and almost destroyed. But not wholly destroyed. Salvation does not destroy creation; but it transforms the Old Creation into a New one."⁷⁷ House's blues mission falls almost directly in line with Tillich's thoughts on the New Being. Tillich suggested that reconciliation, reunion, and resurrection is what brings about this New Being; while this seems like an inherently Christian idea that directly alludes to the resurrection of Christ and new life in God, this is not so. Says Tillich, "resurrection means the victory of the New state of things, the New Being born out of the Old. Resurrection is not an event that might happen in some remote future, but it is the power of the New Being to create life from death, here and now, today and tomorrow."⁷⁸ Although Tillich lived thousands of miles away from House (he was a member of the German high class before moving to America to escape Nazism), his writing resonates almost completely with the attitude and message of Son House. A testament to Tillich's argument, House—whose implementation of such ideas would have predated Tillich—arrived at extremely similar conclusions in completely different settings. House's preaching blues did not require his listeners to identify with Christianity.

A comforting notion to anyone, but especially to the aimless, renegade audience who enjoyed House's blues, Tillich said to secular beings what House might have: "Don't think that we want to convert you away from your secular state to a religious state, that we want to make you religious and members of a very high religion, the Christian . . . This would be of no avail. We want only to communicate

⁷⁷Paul Tillich, "Chapter 2: The New Being," *The New Being*, (New York: Scribner, 1955) 15-25.

⁷⁸*Ibid*, 24.

to you an experience we have had that here and there in the world and now and then in ourselves is a New Creation, usually hidden, but sometimes manifest, and certainly manifest in Jesus who is called the Christ.”⁷⁹ This idea was the lifeblood of House’s style of blues, an innovative, experiential, yet rooted performance that bridged the gap between the hopefulness and solace of the slave songs of old and the blossoming Mississippi blues culture that was struggling to find an ideological focus. If one accepts Tillich’s writing and applies it to Son House’s blues persona, House’s blues take on a completely new dimension. They established the idea that blues culture—the combination of blues music and lyrics, performance, connection between performer and audience, the achievement of total community from the ashes of that community’s destruction—offered African-Americans in Mississippi the creation of “life from death, here and now, today and tomorrow.”⁸⁰ Marrying—or in Tillich’s language, *reconciling*—preaching style with slide guitar style, purpose with grit, good with bad, Son House’s blues mission embodied Tillich’s deconstruction of established religions and secular groups, and his relentlessly affective performance conveyed the immediacy of the moment, displaying blues music’s capability to instill within the listener that fleeting moment of a New Being, a complete experiential change, an experience that House had had now and then in himself along his life’s road of Christianity and blues united. Were it not for House’s legacy regarding these themes in relation to blues music, the genre may have never emerged from its humble beginnings as a vessel for stable finances and local recognition to achieve the transcendental, intricate, and irreplaceable legacy it enjoys today.

79 Ibid, 25.

80 Tillich, “The New Being”

XII. THE IMPORTANCE OF MISSISSIPPI CULTURE AND HISTORY FOR BLUES MUSIC: AND THE IMPORTANCE OF BLUES MUSIC FOR AMERICAN CULTURE AND HISTORY

The blues were present in many places throughout the United States by the 1920s and 1930s. Vaudevillian acts employed many blues patterns in their music, some New Orleans jazz musicians started to infuse 12-bar blues theory into some musical numbers, and composers like W.C. Handy began to rely more solely on blues music for their compositions. Handy is known as the Father of the Blues, but his blues are much different than that heard in the Mississippi Delta. While all the blues' other homes saw it progress through musical theory, sheet music composition, and growth from previous forms of popular musical performance, Mississippi blues were much different, much more secular and unique and tormented. It is no coincidence that this was true, either. Unlike any other region, Mississippi's history during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries served as a direct and integral influence upon blues music and culture. The sharecropping business that emerged in the state was nothing more than legal slavery, as businessmen would pay next to nothing for African American labor, if they paid at all, and reaped profits of a 30 to 40 percent increase. Coupled with a lingering resentment on the part of white Mississippians toward African Americans—the children and grandchildren of these whites' slaves only 50 years prior—and a sense of lost cause after the Civil War, racial animosity reached an even more poisonous level than it had already achieved in the state. Naturally this led to severe and evil mistreatment of many African-Americans, bridging the gap between the inhumane, demented psyche of the slave owner and the establishment of Jim Crow laws and the eventual hatred of segregation and radically intensified racial discrimination. The African-American felt the burden of all of this directly upon his own back, both figuratively and literally. The slave-freeing rhetoric of President Lincoln—though it had taken effect and dominated U.S. policy—was a dream to these people, no different than the dream of freedom itself for slaves preceding Emancipation.

All this converged in a single, incredible moment for Mississippi: the development of blues music—real, tormented, gritty, and beautiful blues—as a coping mechanism, a channel for personal expression, and a stage for unheard and

unprecedented stories of the African-American population in Mississippi, no different than the field songs and camp hollers that guided their slave ancestors through their own turmoil and strife. Combining their ancestral heritage with the evolving heritage of their own struggle, the blues were the ultimate expression and voice of an entire population of hugely ignored and brutally mistreated American citizens. All at once, the music evoked levels of pain unknown to many, a challenge to face an evil that many Americans chose to bury within their hearts, and simultaneously, a vividly colorful portrait of the beautiful character, resilience, and identity of not only the blues' performers, but the blues' intricate Mississippi home, characterized at its heart by an eternal optimism and faith in a better day, no matter how horrid the previous one was. It is because of this that the blues has found an eternal place within American history and culture; unlike many musical genres, the blues are an organic product of America, an unflinching survey of its character in all its beauty, but also in all its suffering. Further still, blues music and lyrics now serve as its own medium for the study and research of black and white relations in the Deep South, sometimes offering a clearer and more heart-wrenching take on the situation's terror than books or even personal accounts which sometimes lost their weight due to a curbed tongue facing the threat of white hate.

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